

New England Federalists: Widening the Sectional Divide in Jeffersonian America

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Even after John Adams's belated success on American television, and Alexander Hamilton's recent conquest of Broadway, Federalists still seem to lag Jeffersonians in popular and scholarly interest. This irritates Professor Dinah Mayo-Bobee of East Tennessee State University, who believes that much of the imbalance has stemmed from widespread interest in Jeffersonian political philosophy.⁽¹⁾ In her view, bias toward Jefferson's thought has encouraged indifference both to the actual effects of Democratic-Republican rule after their triumph in 1800, and some genuinely progressive developments that 'conservative' Federalists helped bring to light during their exile.

In response, she has introduced *New England Federalists: Widening the Sectional Divide in Jeffersonian America*, a compact work based on her doctoral dissertation, to study the process and results of practical policy-making during the period, as Federalists and Republicans worked out their differences. Her chosen subject covers the dialogue between Republicans' creation of laws and policies with disproportionate impact on Northern states, and the response of Northern Federalists to that legislation.

The fruit of her research emphasizes two themes that became firmly intertwined through this period, in ways that could only be resolved some decades later. Unsurprisingly, the first was slavery. Irrespective of its stature as a moral issue in the early republic, slavery held a unique ability to intensify political controversies and resentments. The three-fifths compromise, even while partially reducing the representation Southern states would have gained from a full head-count of slaves, still gave them a head start in Congress that often allowed Southerners to govern without considering any regional interests but their own. Virginia's concurrent grip on the presidency from 1800 effectively made Federalists irrelevant at the national level. Having lost the initiative in public discourse, Federalists were then left to gather strength in unexpected areas so that they might respond tactically.

Much of this political drama played out in trade policy, Mayo-Bobee's second main theme. As a series of non-importation, embargo, and non-intercourse bills forced their region's economy away from shipping before the War of 1812, Federalists found new energy in opposition and began linking the three-fifths compromise and slavery to their mistreatment by the Federal government. In her view, the intertwining of

these two issues jump-started the controversies that came to endanger the republic in the next decade and beyond. As a result, the abolitionism and anti-slavery that eventually helped crush the nation's 'peculiar institution' forged their own links with Federalist dissent. Put another way, what we now think of a progressive impulse for reform was surprisingly compatible with Federalist thought.

She grounds her chronological narrative of these themes with a discussion of the Haitian crisis of 1805–6. While the debate over Haiti began mostly over questions of defense and foreign relations, it quickly drew in slavery as a point of discussion. She explores this evolution less for what it shows about Jefferson and his followers, and more for how it strengthened Federalists' 'opposition repertoire' and 'sparked their political revival'.⁽²⁾

Subsequent chapters on the trade battles and the run-up to the War of 1812 – 'Indissolubly connected with commerce', 'Squabbles in Madam Liberty's family', 'O-Grab-Me', and 'Sincere neutrality' – cover ground more conventionally, but similarly emphasize the radical reaction by Federalists that fractured their own party, diminished their reputation, and eventually led to their demise. The epilogue follows the careers of several Federalists featured in earlier chapters, as they made their way from the War of 1812 to the Civil War.

Not all of *New England Federalists* opens new paths, and the author is quick to recognize previous scholarship. Much work, such as Richard Buel's *America on the Brink*, has already focused on how close Federalists came to tearing the country apart before their own self-destruction in 1815. Looking further back, classics such as Banner's *To the Hartford Convention* and David Hackett Fischer's *Revolution of American Conservatism* both noted the radicalism of Federalists who were more vigorously partisan than the first generation of founders.⁽³⁾ Likewise, the importance of slavery in the trade debate is not a new assertion. Mayo-Bobee herself notes Henry Adams's observation of 'Federalists who hated the South and the power which rested on the dumb vote of slaves' (p. 37), and more recently, Matthew Mason has specifically linked the rise of Northern anti-slavery agitation to the 1808 Embargo.⁽⁴⁾

Where *New England Federalists* scores is in its care in studying the Federalist reaction to Republican policies as those policies unfolded, with special reference to foreign relations beginning with the Haitian crisis. This step not only directs focus away from Charlottesville and Washington, but, more importantly, avoids a provincial perspective that might have resulted from shifting directly to Hartford or Boston. Given Mayo-Bobee's fascination with the interplay between regions as the European wars raged, the best description of her new, improved vantage point would perhaps be a hundred miles off the mid-Atlantic coast. This point of view lends vigor and depth to her analysis of the Haitian crisis as the first appearance of Jefferson's restrictive trade policies, and helps her to link trade, slavery, and anti-slavery more firmly than is often done.

A by-product of her analysis is that, while not all Federalists placed a high priority on abolition or other regulation of slavery, the electoral weakness created by the three-fifths compromise certainly fueled their rage. The resulting rhetoric on this issue invited many reformers out of the woodwork, and attracted free black men to the Federalist side.

Mayo-Bobee sees two consequences in this movement, both of which deserve consideration but should not be accepted uncritically. First, her presentation puts a surprisingly progressive slant on Federalism, often viewed as the ideology of angry, failed reactionaries with increasingly sectional interests. As the author is careful to show, their dissent went beyond negative defensiveness to adopt some positive characteristics, particularly in its increased willingness to fight slavery. While making this case risks attaching ahistorical virtues to favored protagonists, shining more light on Federalists during their exile from power may have its own value in an age accustomed to celebrating Jefferson and Madison. If nothing else, it provides a useful reminder that today's distinctions between left and right would have meant little in the early Republic. While it is easy to think of Jeffersonians as sympathetic to radicalism, it should be remembered that their Federalist opponents often liked to think of themselves as 'moderate' and 'liberal'.

The book's epilogue extends this observation to make Mayo-Bobee's second point, slightly weakening her argument even as it simultaneously suggests some new avenues for inquiry. She uses this chapter to follow up the careers of former Federalists after the collapse of their party, always focusing on the role that slavery, abolition, and the three-fifths clause played in the very diverse paths these men's later lives took. Some, like Rufus King, remained adamant about stopping the spread of slavery. In contrast, Daniel Webster moved from opposing the first Missouri Compromise to a more conciliatory posture. Following his own path, as usual, John Quincy Adams, eventually drifted back to a more conventional New England profile after having jumped from the Federalists to support Madison in 1808. In his later Congressional career, he defiantly opposed the gag rule in Congress, and memorably advocated for the sailors of the *Amistad*. At this level, Mayo-Bobee's short analysis is inconclusive.

Her great leap in this section is to close by quoting Josiah Quincy, in which he directly linked Lincoln's Republican policies to earlier Federalist efforts against Democratic-Republicans. Previously, she had identified their failures through the War of 1812 as validating the need for Northern unity (p. 156ff). Here, she takes this argument further by re-framing the partisan struggle before 1815 as the opening act in a longer drama concerning abolition. Certainly, this perspective offers some value, both for looking at waves of success and failure on both sides of the slavery debate, and alluding indirectly to one of Lincoln's great political priorities, which was preserving unity in the anti-slavery coalition. The 1856 election had provided a tantalizing glimpse at what might happen if Democrats' opponents were ever to agree on a single candidate, and the earlier failure of Federalists could well have served as its own warning to Lincoln against losing his grip on the entire North.

Of course, taking Josiah Quincy too literally may overstate the relevance of Federalists to *ante-bellum* Whigs and Republicans as they tried to dislodge the Democrats from the White House. As Mayo-Bobee's other examples from the epilogue demonstrate, the path between the Federalist Party and abolitionist Republicans was hardly straight or plain, no matter what Quincy might have said in his old age. Among other things, Federalists maintained a reputation for treasonous disloyalty for decades after the War of 1812, which discouraged politicians from linking themselves too closely to their legacy. A more serious problem is that viewing Federalist dissent through the lens of *ante-bellum* politics effectively pushes discussion away from the historical analysis of the moment, in favor of describing longer-term political trends. Even so, this idea does open up some room to re-visit whether Whigs and Lincoln Republicans adopted Federalist characteristics, and otherwise invites reconsideration of the plausible, if somewhat arbitrary barrier of 1815 in United States political history.

The framework of the central part of *New England Federalists* also suggests room for more research beyond the scope of this slim volume. Early on, Mayo-Bobee mentions the Wilberforce Society's meeting, which celebrated the first anniversary of the end of the slave trade in 1808. It would be interesting to explore whether 1808 was more significant for its end of the slave trade or the enforcement of the Embargo. A corresponding question would be to study the dance between Southern rhetoric and Federalists' response after 1808. Examining whether political and sectional differences evolved meaningfully in response to any subsequent changes in the slave economy would add richness to Mayo-Bobee's observation as well as

providing an interesting test of its strength. A potentially useful subset of these discussions would be to link her own observations to how religious rhetoric changed over time toward slavery, both in the established, Federalist-leaning Congregational churches, and the Protestant sects that leaned toward Republicans.

Finally, two other areas that she mentions, and which a work of a different scale could usefully link to her insights on Northerners' politics, are New England's shift from commerce to manufacturing – with its own inevitable ties to slavery – and the Confederation era in the 1780s, when slavery first started to become a genuinely national issue. These are opportunities for further research, however, rather than omissions. As it stands, Professor Mayo-Bobee's work offers a fresh perspective on a somewhat under-followed area. By analyzing Federalists' radicalism as a response to Republican policies beginning with the Haiti crisis of 1805–6, she effectively allows a re-thinking of the path of dissent that reached its anti-climax after the Hartford Convention. In addition, she provides a framework for enhancing our understanding of the role of slavery in the sectional divisions that eventually led to secession and Civil War. By extending the narrative beyond the death of Federalism and before the first Embargo bill, she has left room for additional work to be done in the decades after 1815, as well as before the Jeffersonian ascent in 1800. For these reasons, *New England Federalists* will doubtless hold interest to scholars and students. Readers in search of a less-concentrated writing style may also find that her original dissertation, which is more expansively and clearly written, remains well worth a look.

Notes

1. Dinah Mayo-Bobee, “‘Something Energetic and Spirited:’ Massachusetts Federalists, Rational Politics, and Political Economy in the Age of Jefferson, 1805-1815’ (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2007), p. 62.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Dinah Mayo-Bobee, “‘Something Energetic and Spirited:’”, p. 66.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, NY, 1965); James M. Banner, *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815*, (New York, NY, 1970).
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic*, (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), p. 40.
[Back to \(4\)](#)

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